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1

Social Murder

WEALTH, POWER, AND VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

I asked a man in prison once how he happened to be there and he said he had stolen a pair of shoes. I told him if he had stolen a railroad he would be a United States Senator.

—MOTHER JONES, 1925¹

THE UNITED States is an exceptionally militarized, lethal, and violent country. The growing concentration of economic, political, and military power is draining America of vital resources to sustain healthy and peaceful communities. It is pushing more people to the margins, where a police officer, a prison cell, a tent, a military recruiter, or a deadly dose of fentanyl-laced heroin is waiting for them.

Rates of homicide, gun violence, suicide, drug overdoses, incarceration, traffic deaths, poverty, and police use of force are exceptionally high in the United States compared to those of other Western countries. In a historic reversal, US life expectancy has fallen below that of much poorer countries as a growing number of people in this country are at risk of losing their homes, health, livelihoods, and savings. Tens of millions of US gun owners are locked and loaded, ready to take the law into their own hands or to turn their guns on themselves. And escalating political violence has put the electoral system and democracy in America in mortal danger.

The United States is increasingly unable or unwilling to stem violence in its many forms. Powerful economic and political interests are rendering less powerful groups and individuals in the United States more susceptible to premature

death and other harms. Friedrich Engels called this social murder. Social murder is harder to defend against than everyday homicides “because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.”²

US corporations commit social murder with impunity on an even grander scale than they once did. Pharmaceutical executives have been responsible for enormous harms, including the deadly opioid epidemic, and have escaped serious legal or other consequences. So have the titans of Wall Street who unleashed the 2007–9 financial and foreclosures crises. And so have the oil and gas company executives who knew for decades that the burning of fossil fuels would have catastrophic results but stayed silent as they continued doing business as usual.

Since the country’s founding, the US criminal legal system has been more forgiving and less punitive toward the well-to-do and well-connected.³ Over the centuries, this punishment gap has waxed and waned. As the US incarceration rate skyrocketed to record levels starting in the 1970s, this gap widened considerably.

Executives in the C-suites escaped accountability as they amassed more economic and political power. Meanwhile, the country doubled down on pursuing people accused of street crimes, drug offenses, and immigration violations. Today the United States incarcerates more of its people than nearly every other country, even as it decriminalizes or turns a blind eye to elite-level corporate crime. Public and scholarly attention remains fixated on street crime—although corporate malfeasance directly and indirectly harms far more people in the United States.

Penal and social policies have long been two sides of the same coin in governing social marginality.⁴ But penal policy has become the policy of first resort to address the massive economic and social dislocations of the last half century in the United States. America is vexed by pervasive state violence thanks to its unprecedented prison boom and the militarization of its police forces.

The country’s deep investment in its overseas empire—including the massive military budget and the unassailable assumption that the United States is the indispensable nation destined to police the world—has compounded the problem of violence in America. The global war on terror launched after 9/11 shattered numerous countries and communities around the world. Back home in the United States, it eroded the will and capacity to stem violence in its many forms. For all the talk of political polarization in the United States, the bloated US military budget sails through Congress most years with just a

handful of dissenters, if that. Meanwhile, a growing number of people in the United States, including veterans, are denied adequate food, shelter, and health care, let alone opportunities to lead dignified and meaningful lives.

When discussing violence in America, we need to widen the analytic lens to include structural violence.⁵ As legal scholar Paul Butler explains, structural violence encompasses deaths and other harms that are the result of “a process or ongoing social condition embedded in our everyday lives” that robs people of their potential. Structural violence stands in contrast to the more familiar and narrow understanding of violence as a single event, such as a homicide, robbery, or back-alley beating by a police officer.⁶

Political, economic, corporate, legal, military, social, and other structures that we take for granted are meting out extraordinary levels of structural violence—or social murder—that is less visible but often more deadly. Unprecedented drops in US life expectancy due to rising rates of suicide, drug overdoses, alcoholism, obesity, and chronic illnesses like diabetes and hypertension are not just the product of individual choices, individual pathologies, or individual circumstances.⁷ They stem from social, economic, and political developments that foster structural violence and poverty. As sociologist Matthew Desmond states, “poverty is an injury, a taking.” Millions of people in the United States “do not end up poor by a mistake of history or personal conduct. Poverty persists because some wish and will it to.”⁸

A central argument of this book is that corporate impunity, the financialization of the economy, militarized policing, the burgeoning carceral state, and the forever wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere have fostered state, structural, and economic violence in America. They have also been impediments to stemming interpersonal violence or so-called street crimes. The growing concentration of military, economic, and political power has siphoned off vital resources, preying on the most vulnerable communities and individuals and normalizing violence and death. It has impeded the United States from mitigating the root causes of violent and other street crimes and has contributed to falling rates of life expectancy. These developments have furthered the consolidation of what geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls the “anti-state state” in which guaranteeing social well-being and preventing premature deaths are no longer considered the government’s *raison d’être*.⁹

The US failure to protect its people from all these harms has increased the brittleness of democracy in America. Punishment serves a vital role in reinforcing the moral bounds of society by demarcating what actions are considered wrong and who is blameworthy, as French sociologist Émile Durkheim

once noted.¹⁰ The repeated failure to hold corporations, their executives, and their political patrons accountable has fostered political instability and undermined the legitimacy of US political and economic institutions. So has the related rise in state and structural violence. Taken together, these developments raise the prospect of a bleak, undemocratic future as violence begets more violence, and America morphs into a failed state.¹¹

State Violence: The Changing Carceral State

A country's incarceration rate is an important barometer of state violence and control. As underlying economic and political conditions have shifted over the past fifty years, so have patterns of incarceration and other penal sanctions. But discussions of the carceral state and criminal justice reform in the United States still tend to focus on urban areas and African American people, particularly the hyperincarceration of Black men. The ways in which interlocking systems of punishment, disadvantage, and violence have been diffusing to other groups and communities in the United States have not been central issues in most scholarly analyses and public discussions.¹² But since the race to incarcerate began more than five decades ago, there have been important demographic and geographic shifts in who is ending up in prison and jail, as detailed in chapter 2.

Between the mid-1970s and the turn of the twenty-first century, the United States became the world's leading warden as its incarceration rate increased more than fourfold, and hundreds of new prisons, jails, and immigrant detention facilities were built.¹³ Thanks to a political stampede coming from many directions, the country ratcheted up penalties for crimes ranging from homicide to burglary to immigration and drug offenses as public officials turned to "governing through crime."¹⁴ The prison boom and punitive turn in the United States did not wane even as rates of violent street crime began falling in the mid-1990s and plunged to historic lows over the next two decades. The massive increase in US incarceration rates was responsible for at most only a small portion of this historic drop in street crime.¹⁵ Other factors were more consequential, including a shrinking proportion of young people, new policing strategies, shifts in the market for illegal drugs, and investments in public housing and public services.¹⁶

Deindustrialization and other changes in urban economies and politics in the 1950s and 1960s helped fuel mass incarceration and get-tough policies targeted at African American people in urban areas.¹⁷ More recently, the economic hol-

lowing out of rural and Rust Belt communities in the United States that are not riding the crest of urban gentrification and the high-tech boom has rendered those left behind more vulnerable to state and structural violence today, including incarceration and premature death.¹⁸ Over the last twenty-five years, Black-white disparities in incarceration have certainly not closed in the United States, but they have narrowed.¹⁹ In dozens of states (both blue and red), incarceration rates are slowing or declining in urban areas while rising in rural and suburban communities.²⁰ Furthermore, as the US incarceration rate decreased slightly over the past few years, the rate for women remained at a historic high; and immigrant detention and convictions for sex offenses (some of them quite minor) became major drivers of the carceral state. With Donald Trump's return to the White House, immigration policy is turbocharging state violence and the carceral state.

State Violence: The Police

Police use of excessive force is another major barometer of state violence. Police officers in the United States are accustomed to deploying extraordinary levels of violence and coercion shielded from outside scrutiny and control. The resources available to US police departments and law enforcement agencies have increased dramatically without a commensurate increase in their accountability to the communities they are supposed to serve, as detailed in chapter 3.

Categorizing police killings of civilians as acts of state violence shifts the emphasis from the actions and biases of individual officers to the larger institutional, structural, racial, and historical forces that are at the root of excessive use of force in the United States. Doing so “calls attention to the systemic forces” that permit individual officers “to act with impunity,” explains historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor.²¹

Black people in the United States are more than twice as likely as white people to be killed by the police.²² But compared to the rates of police violence in Western Europe and Canada, white people in the United States are also victims of police violence at exceptional rates. Police use of excessive force in the United States is widely assumed to be primarily a problem for urban areas. But homicides by police have been declining in the largest cities while continuing to rise in rural and suburban communities.²³

The lethality of US police forces has proximate and deeper historical causes. The tendency to focus on the culpability of individual officers, most notably the impact of their implicit and explicit racial and other biases, occludes

the institutional factors that are far more consequential in explaining levels of police violence. These institutional factors, as chronicled in chapter 3, include differences in training, weaponry, and standards for the use of force; the clout of police unions; and a string of court decisions that largely immunize US police officers from criminal charges and civil lawsuits.

As for the deeper historical factors, many critics of US policing single out the country's history of slavery, white supremacy, Jim Crow, and the "new Jim Crow" to explain why police in the United States are so violent and deadly. But additional historical factors are also culprits. As discussed in chapters 4 and 5, America's exceptionally violent history of suppressing workers, organized labor, and political unrest left a bloody imprint on the development of US police forces. So did the emergence of the United States as a global empire in the twentieth century. More recently, the tightening ties between law enforcement, the US military, and the white power movement have fueled the lethality of US police forces.

State Violence: The Warfare State

When it comes to wealth, power, and violence in America, developments at home and abroad are "mutually constitutive."²⁴ Rising US militarization has generated violence not only overseas but also back in the United States.²⁵ Blowback on the homefront from the global empire and war on terror has been a problem hiding in plain sight, just like mass incarceration once was.

Like the carceral state, the warfare state has metastasized into the political, social, and economic fabric of the United States. It has been compromising and enfeebling democratic institutions and heaping more disadvantages onto already disadvantaged groups, as detailed in chapter 5.²⁶ The warfare state has fueled political marginalization and alienation as people in small towns and rural communities are more likely to serve in the military and be wounded or killed in action. It also has fostered the militarization of local police departments and the surges of the white power movement and political violence. Furthermore, the warfare state has plundered the country of vital political and material resources to stem crime in the streets, crime in the suites, and premature deaths.

Today, the United States operates more than 750 military bases in at least eighty countries—though no one, not even the Pentagon, knows exactly how many.²⁷ (China has nine or so.)²⁸ The United States has active and reserve troops stationed in nearly every country, and US drones conduct bombing raids and

missile attacks in numerous countries. United States special forces, which reportedly number seventy-four thousand, have been deployed in over 150 countries, where they carry out missions shrouded in secrecy.²⁹ The official tab for US expenditures on the military and defense was over \$900 million in 2023—or more than what the next nine countries spent in total. Actual US spending on the military and defense may be nearly twice the official figures.³⁰

The ways in which militarization is imperiling US democratic institutions and contributing to the increase in all kinds of violence in the United States have not been central to recent public and academic discussions about violence and the enfeebled state of democracy in America. Indeed, as President Donald Trump surrounded himself in 2017 with a cordon of generals in top civilian positions that was unprecedented in modern US history, the political establishment and mainstream media approvingly referred to the president's civilian generals as “the adults in the room.”³¹ A major multiyear project funded by the Social Science Research Council on the “anxieties of democracy,” which involved dozens of leading scholars, did not include a single essay on the US military or the forever wars.³²

Military conquest and occupation have been central features of American state building since the first colonies were established.³³ Yet while military conquest was a key feature of American political development, military adventures were regarded as intermittent rather than integral to the American state and society for much of US history. Over the course of the twentieth century, there was a basic shift. The quest for perpetual global military supremacy congealed as a central feature of the American state and American identity by the late 1940s.³⁴

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States forged what historian and former military officer Andrew Bacevich calls the “Washington rules,” which were premised on constructing an unrivaled global empire.³⁵ The US defeat in Vietnam in 1975, the end of the Cold War in 1989, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 provided important openings to jettison the Washington rules. But those opportunities were quickly forfeited. After 9/11, the global war on terror and forever wars became a codicil to the Washington rules, “accepted policy, hardly more controversial than the practice of stationing US troops abroad.”³⁶ During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump appeared to set the Washington rules on fire as he excoriated the US invasion of Iraq and the forever wars.³⁷ The US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere were an accelerant for Trump's narrative of betrayal that propelled him into the White House that year.

Corporate Violence and Corporate Crime: The Culture of Little or No Control

The aftershocks of the 2007–9 financial and foreclosure crises were also accelerants for Trump’s narrative of betrayal. The wreckage from these twin crises and the failure to pursue and punish the main culprits created a huge political opening that Trump brashly stepped into. Trump seized this political moment, but he did not create it. Indeed, it had been decades in the making, as shown in chapters 6 to 9.

Over the last fifteen years or so, mass incarceration in the United States has become a central concern in criminology and in public discussions of crime and punishment.³⁸ But scholars, policymakers, and the public have generally ignored the concurrent *de facto* decriminalization of crime in the suites and how it has transformed the criminal legal system, fostered violence in its many forms, and put US democracy at risk.³⁹

In identifying the causes of mass incarceration, sociologist David Garland argued years ago that societal angst stemming from deep changes in the US economy and society in the decades immediately following World War II ushered in a “culture of control.”⁴⁰ The widespread perception of the government’s impotency to mitigate the economic upheavals of the 1970s, notably the twin shocks of stagflation and the oil crisis, fueled the culture of control. The government’s failure to tame these economic demons cast doubt on its efficacy, legitimacy, and *raison d’être*. As public officials struggled to curb inflation and restore economic growth, they lashed out. They promoted harsher measures to punish crime in the streets for their symbolic and expressive value, according to Garland.

While the culture of control was taking hold in the United States, another radical transformation was under way that has received far less attention. A culture of no control—or little control—over elite-level corporate crime was taking root away from the political limelight. As it doubled down on pursuing and punishing people accused of street and drug crimes and immigration offenses, the United States retreated from regulating corporations and prosecuting and punishing their executives despite a tsunami of elite-level criminal activities by leading banks, accounting firms, and major corporations. Keeping the public focus on immigration offenses, drug crimes, homicides, robberies, and other street crimes was a winning strategy to rivet political attention and public resources on battling crime in the streets, not crime in the suites.⁴¹

In hailing the so-called great crime drop that began in the 1990s, criminologists, public figures, and the media focused on trends in street crimes. They

did not take into account the huge corporate crime waves that were buffeting the country.⁴² As President Bill Clinton was about to leave office, the dot-com bubble burst under the weight of fraudulent initial public offerings (IPOs). In the early aughts, the energy giant Enron and several other large corporations went under in a sea of fraudulent reports about their earnings and debt. Epic fraud in the subprime mortgage market hurled the country and the world toward the Great Recession, which began in 2007. Since then, white-collar and corporate prosecutions have plummeted to record lows. Meanwhile financial crimes, including eye-popping cases of money laundering, accounting fraud, and market manipulation, have escalated.⁴³ So have cases of mass-market consumer fraud and internet-related crimes.⁴⁴

Victims and Costs of Corporate Violence and Crime

Crime in the suites victimizes more people and causes more harm than crime in the streets. Yet the US media don't acknowledge much of it; criminologists mostly ignore it; and the country's leading clearinghouses for crime statistics don't really track it. And the word *corruption* is seldom used to refer to the criminal activities of US corporations, their executives, and their political patrons.⁴⁵

The harms from corporate malfeasance “are often the result of criminal recklessness” but are seldom prosecuted.⁴⁶ Those harms are huge.⁴⁷ How huge is hard to say because the data the government collects on white-collar and corporate crime are sketchy compared to what it compiles on street crime.⁴⁸ An estimated 125,000 people in the United States die each year from traumatic injuries on the job and from occupational diseases, such as black lung and asbestosis—or more than five times the number of people who were murdered in 2021.⁴⁹ The “silent violence of pollution, contaminated food, hazardous consumer products, and hospital malpractice” kills tens of thousands of people yearly and injures many more.⁵⁰

Wage theft by employers—another crime that is seldom prosecuted—robs low-wage workers of an estimated \$50 billion each year. This sum is equivalent to about three and a half times the total yearly losses due to all robberies, burglaries, larcenies, and motor vehicle thefts in the United States.⁵¹ Estimates of health-care fraud range from \$240 billion to \$750 billion annually.⁵² But who really knows how much. The subprime mortgage scandal was the catalyst for the Great Recession, during which US households lost an estimated \$19–22 trillion in wealth, including real estate, stocks, and retirement savings.⁵³ The crisis rocked financial and political systems around the world because the global economy was (and is) deeply entangled with Wall Street and the US real estate

market.⁵⁴ Fraudulent foreclosures during the subprime mortgage scandal robbed millions of people in the United States of their homes. The foreclosure crisis spurred the biggest mass movement of people in the United States since the Great Depression. It also fueled today's housing crisis.⁵⁵

Corporate crime in just one industry can result in more deaths, injuries, and property losses annually than all kinds of street crime combined.⁵⁶ One of the most notorious examples is the pharmaceutical industry, which has a long and well-documented history of shamelessly marketing dangerous drugs and committing bribery and fraud on an epic scale.⁵⁷ Pharmaceutical companies also routinely engage in shockingly unethical behavior, including unscrupulous off-label marketing, price gouging, and exploiting loopholes in the patent system to reap billions of dollars by delaying the release of safer and more efficacious versions of their drugs.⁵⁸

Widespread criminal and unethical behavior in the pharmaceutical industry sparked the opioid crisis, which has killed hundreds of thousands of people in the United States since the turn of the twenty-first century. Fatal drug overdoses increased more than fivefold between 2000 and 2022 and contributed to unprecedented declines in the country's life expectancy rate.⁵⁹ Drug overdoses are now the leading cause of accidental death in the United States, surpassing motor vehicle accidents, and the top cause of death by far for people under age fifty.⁶⁰ The Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress estimated that the toll of the opioid crisis was \$1.5 trillion in 2020 alone—or 7 percent of the GDP.⁶¹

In the latest war on drugs, the harshest words and most punitive policies have been aimed at people who use opioids, not at the pharmaceutical companies, medical providers, government regulators, and policymakers who triggered and perpetuated the opioid crisis, as detailed in chapters 10 and 11. The individuals and companies that opened the floodgates for tens of billions of high-dosage opioid pills to flow through the United States have largely escaped punishment and accountability.

The Limits of Neoliberalism as an Explanation

Political and institutional factors mediated the construction of the culture of little or no control of corporate malfeasance and corporate violence in the United States. Its emergence was not preordained but rather contingent, fluid, and multilayered. The drive to radically reorient the criminal legal system toward a hands-off approach to elite-level corporate crime while mercilessly

cracking down on people accused of street and drug crimes and immigration violations was not seamless. Just as the construction of the carceral state was not linear, neither was the decriminalization of crime in the suites and the construction of the shield of corporate impunity.⁶²

The shift toward corporate decriminalization over the last five decades occurred by fits and starts as regulators, law enforcement, policymakers, and legislators alternately lightened up and toughened up on white-collar and corporate crime. But the overall trend was toward more leniency. The waves of deregulation and a growing bipartisan enthusiasm for neoliberalism since the 1970s are important factors. But they cannot on their own explain this trend toward easing up on corporate criminality.

Neoliberalism is a useful shorthand way to sum up a cluster of political and economic beliefs and policies, including deifying the market and disdaining government intervention. Neoliberalism is rooted in the premise that free markets produce the most efficient and just outcomes, so governments should just get out of the way. As Bill Clinton pronounced in his 1996 State of the Union address, “The era of big government is over.” The hallmarks of neoliberalism include deregulation, fealty to so-called free trade, retrenchment of the welfare state, low taxes (at least for corporations and wealthy people), and the privatization of everything from schools to sewer systems.

Neoliberalism also reifies the individual over the society. As British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously once said, “there’s no such thing as society.”⁶³ People are seen primarily as market actors—on the job, in their communities, on dating apps, and even in their families—always striving to secure a competitive advantage by building up their human capital and, increasingly, their individual brand, even when money is not the main issue. Neoliberalism is not just a package of economic beliefs and policies. By crowding out a vocabulary of politics and replacing it with a lexicon of economics in which the allegedly neutral “free” market rules, neoliberalism renders the operation of power much less visible.⁶⁴ As Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve, brashly declared in 2007: “National security aside, it hardly makes any difference who will be the next president. The world is governed by market forces.”⁶⁵

Fraught with contradictions, neoliberalism’s political power has long rested on political and ideological sleights of hand that keep those contradictions out of the public eye and public debates. Foremost among them is the myth that the state has retreated under the neoliberal order. The government did not retreat but rather repositioned itself. It pulled back or was forced

back in areas such as providing health and social services, public education, public transportation, and workplace protections. Meanwhile, the government's power and capacity to police and punish people in the United States for street crimes, drug offenses, and immigration violations grew vastly thanks to the unprecedented expansion of the carceral state. So did its capacity to police the globe.

Neoliberalism's reputed disdain for government goes only so far. For example, Charles Koch, one of the richest people in the United States, is a die-hard crusader against taxes and the social safety net. He is also a longtime champion of the so-called free market. But he became a billionaire many times over thanks to how his Koch Industries expanded primarily "into businesses that are uncompetitive, dominated by monopolistic firms, and deeply intertwined with government subsidies and regulation."⁶⁶ Fracking, the hazardous method of extracting fossil fuels deeply embedded in shale, became profitable only through government-sponsored research and generous government subsidies, which Koch and other producers of natural gas and oil have profited from and ardently defended.⁶⁷ Similarly, pharmaceutical companies have fought to eviscerate numerous government regulations that protect patients and consumers. Meanwhile they have doggedly defended patent laws and government regulations that permit them to maintain lucrative monopolies on drugs, many of which were developed with generous government support.

To understand the quiescence toward corporate malfeasance, a fine-grained understanding of the political, historical, institutional, and ideological terrain that neoliberalism traverses is necessary. Treating neoliberalism as an all-powerful, all-encompassing, ahistorical force obscures the varied and at times interlocking economic, political, ideological, cultural, racial, and other factors that shape this terrain and fuel the many strands of violence in America.⁶⁸

Sociologist Barrington Moore railed against ideological and cultural explanations that neglected how political conflicts, institutional developments, and shifting elite interests transmit certain values and ideologies from one generation to the next. "To maintain and transmit a value system," Moore explained, "human beings are punched, bullied, sent to jail, thrown into concentration camps, cajoled, bribed, made into heroes, encouraged to read newspapers, stood up against a wall and shot, and sometimes even taught sociology."⁶⁹ In that spirit, we need to understand how the ideology of neoliberalism is maintained and transmitted—or forced to pull back—as the political, economic, social, racial, institutional, and international context shifts.

Financialization and the Politics of Entitlement

The financialization of the US economy, polity, and society over the last half century is a major contour of this context, as detailed in chapters 6 to 9. One expert on the US political economy likens financialization to a “Copernican revolution” in which business and society now orbit around a financial sector that has grown to an unprecedented size.⁷⁰ The financial sector encompasses firms and individuals that make their money primarily through financial services, including banks, hedge funds, pension funds, insurance companies, and private equity firms.⁷¹ The ideologies and activities of the financial industry now permeate not just the economy but also the polity, society, and even the educational system and family life.

Since the mid-1980s, the financial sector has been generating only 4 to 5 percent of all jobs in the United States. But this sector typically accounts for almost a third of yearly corporate profits—up from between 10 and 15 percent in the 1950s and 1960s.⁷² The financial sector has been consuming disproportionate slices not only of corporate profits and the country’s wealth but also of its educational elite.⁷³

Financialization facilitated an astounding upward redistribution of wealth and political power. In 1980, the richest 1 percent of people in the United States were receiving 9 percent of overall income—a division that had remained relatively constant since World War II. By 2007, the share of the top 1 percent had skyrocketed to 23 percent.⁷⁴ Wealth has become even more concentrated than income. As of 2022, the top 1 percent held about 35 percent of the total personal wealth in the United States, up from a modern low of 22 percent in 1978. During roughly that same period, wealth held by the 0.1 percent more than doubled to nearly 20 percent (see figure 1.1). In 1982, the combined worth of the 400 richest people in the United States was \$225 billion in today’s dollars.⁷⁵ Four decades later, the United States had some 735 billionaires, who together were worth \$4.7 trillion.⁷⁶

On the political spectrum, these multibillionaires tend to lean toward the right, the hard right, and the antidemocratic, neofascist right.⁷⁷ As billionaire financier Warren Buffett quipped in 2006, “There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”⁷⁸ Economic elites and organized groups representing their interests largely determine US government policy. Average citizens and interest groups have little to no influence if they do not have the backing of a billionaire or at least a decamillionaire.⁷⁹ More money than ever is corrupting the political system thanks to the

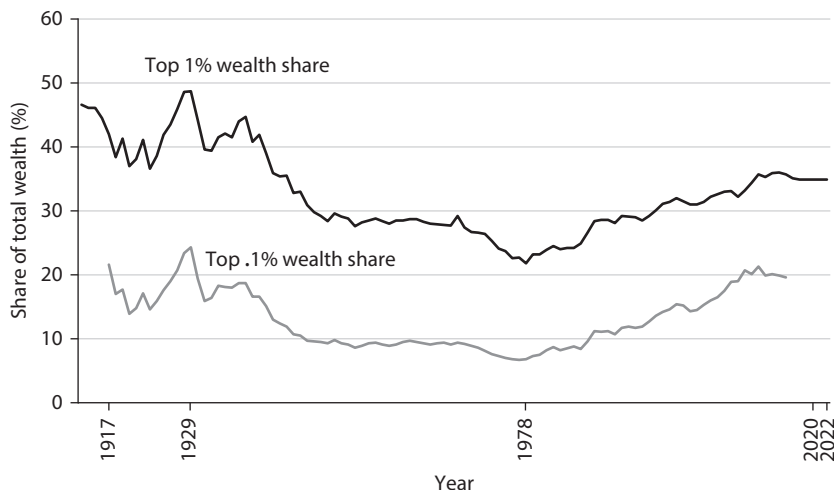


FIGURE 1.1. US Wealth Inequality, 1913–2022. *Sources:* World Inequality Database, “Wealth Inequality, USA, 1963–2023,” n.d., <https://wid.world/country/usa/> (accessed February 23, 2025); and Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, “The Rise of Income and Wealth Inequality in America: Evidence from Distributional Macroeconomic Accounts,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 10, fig. 1; original data courtesy of the authors.

huge personal fortunes that financialization and militarization facilitated. The US Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision in 2010 and *McCutcheon* ruling in 2014 compounded these problems as they swept away vestiges of restrictions on corporate campaign donations and other political activities.⁸⁰

Thanks to the unprecedented political and economic clout of the financial and high-tech sectors—including the revolving door between Wall Street, leading corporate law firms, and the top rungs of government—financiers and high-tech executives have amassed overwhelming authority and resources to define the economic and political narrative, dictate the political and policy solutions, and escape major penalties or other consequences for their criminal activities. Call it the politics of entitlement.

As financialization accelerated, leading financial institutions and their executives also had greater personal and institutional incentives to take the economy on a rough ride to the edge of the cliff. And if they misjudged where the edge was, chances had increased that the government would rescue them in the name of rescuing the economy because these financial institutions had become too big to fail and too big to jail.

The Courts, Corporate Crime, and Violence in America

Since the 1970s, the courts have been instrumental in the buildup of the carceral state as they sanctioned all sorts of exceptionally punitive laws and practices that have made it easier for the criminal legal system to apprehend, convict, and severely punish people accused of street and drug crimes and immigration offenses. Meanwhile, the courts have been galvanizing the culture of little or no control over corporations and their executives, which has fueled structural violence and social murder. The judicial turn toward business accelerated under Chief Justice John Roberts, who has helmed the most business-friendly US Supreme Court in almost a century. The Second Circuit Court in New York City, the most consequential federal appeals court for securities law, also enabled this shift.⁸¹

The judiciary has stripped prosecutors of key weapons to investigate and prosecute corporate malfeasance while expanding the legal protections for corporations and their executives.⁸² The US Supreme Court has doggedly stripped the administrative state of its regulatory powers, including striking down the decades-old *Chevron* ruling in.⁸³ In a series of decisions, the US Supreme Court has been immunizing public officials from charges of corruption for accepting bribes, kickbacks, and “gratuities.” In his dissent in the 2010 *Citizens United* decision, Justice John Paul Stevens denounced the court’s tighter embrace of a “crabbed view of corruption” over the prior quarter century.⁸⁴

A growing cadre of judges on the US Supreme Court and elsewhere proclaim their fealty to the “original” meaning of the US Constitution. But they blithely ignore how corruption was a central issue at the constitutional and ratifying conventions and how the framers took an expansive view of what constitutes official corruption.⁸⁵ In her stinging dissent to the landmark 2024 *Snyder v. United States* decision, which greatly circumscribes federal safeguards against public corruption, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson denounced the majority’s “absurd and atextual reading of the law.” She warned that legally sanctioning gratuities to reward greedy public officials for past actions “makes government—at every level—less responsive, less efficient, and less trustworthy.”⁸⁶

Corporations and their executives became more adept at maneuvering themselves beyond the reach not only of the criminal courts but also of the civil courts thanks to a slew of corporate-friendly legal decisions. People victimized by corporations were increasingly shut out from receiving monetary compensation and other redress through civil lawsuits. They were denied their

day in court thanks to the proliferation of binding mandatory arbitration clauses that favor businesses and employers; nondisclosure agreements that keep corporate malfeasance shrouded; and higher hurdles to file and prevail in class-action lawsuits.⁸⁷

The courts and lawmakers have contributed to escalating violence in America in additional ways. The US Supreme Court's radical reinterpretation of the Second Amendment's so-called right to bear arms helped put an estimated 400 million guns in private hands in the United States (including at least twenty million military-style assault rifles).⁸⁸ This death march has propelled the country's exceptional rates of homicide, shootings, and suicide.⁸⁹ Every year for the past quarter century, the number of gun suicides has outpaced the number of gun homicides.⁹⁰ Black people in the United States are much more likely to be murdered, while non-Hispanic white people, especially men, are far more likely to die of suicide. Indeed the suicide rate for non-Hispanic white people is close to the homicide rate for Black people.⁹¹ In California and some other states, gun homicide rates in rural and semirural towns and counties far surpass the rates in major cities. Kern County, a rural area north of Los Angeles, is California's deadliest county, with people shot to death at a rate nearly twice that of the state's largest city.⁹²

The Great Recession, the Financial Crisis, and the Criminal Legal System

Scholars have ably excavated the underlying causes, as well as some of the far-reaching consequences, of the financialization of the US economy and the 2007–9 financial and foreclosure crises.⁹³ They also have shown how the Republican and Democratic parties were deeply culpable in the financialization of the US economy and in the ascent of the uber-rich's politics of entitlement.⁹⁴ But the seismic impact that financialization has had on the criminal legal system has garnered less attention.

Experts on the carceral state have identified some important aspects of the direct impact of financialization on the criminal legal system. They have shown, for example, how financiers and their political allies shrewdly repurposed financial instruments, such as lease revenue bonds, to obscure the real costs of the jail and prison boom; how the push for privatization of prisons, jails, immigrant detention facilities, parole, and probation also helped to keep the real costs of the carceral state out of the public eye; how new financial gimmicks, such as social impact bonds, were not likely to reduce the incarceration

tion rate even as they lined the pockets of Goldman Sachs and other financiers that promoted them; and how the neoliberal and deregulatory impulses that fueled financialization also fueled enthusiasm for emphasizing reentry, justice reinvestment, and reducing recidivism as the cures for mass incarceration, even though centering the reform agenda on these three R's would likely bolster, not dismantle, the carceral state.⁹⁵

But the impact of financialization on the criminal legal system and the carceral state is much more extensive than this. With the political and economic ascent of the financial sector, the criminal legal system has radically retreated from policing, prosecuting, and punishing elite-level corporate criminal misconduct. Furthermore, financialization, the corporate crime waves, and the *de facto* decriminalization of crime in the suites have robbed individuals, communities, and the country of critical financial and other resources to vanquish the root causes of violent street crime. They also have left more people vulnerable to structural violence and propelled a political legitimacy crisis.

The Democratic and Republican parties have both been culprits in institutionalizing and normalizing the decriminalization of crime in the suites since the 1970s. Despite loud warnings early on, criminality and unethical behavior festered for years in the mortgage market and infected the wider financial sector. When the White House, Congress, and the Federal Reserve finally acted under President George W. Bush and then President Barack Obama, they laddled trillions of taxpayer dollars on the financial institutions that were the prime culprits. The government bailed out the leading banks and other financial institutions and did not demand much in return, not even meaningful restraints on executive compensation. Banks, financial firms, and their top executives faced no serious criminal penalties. The fines levied against them were minuscule compared to the quarterly profits they raked in.

After promising hope and change in the 2008 election, Barack Obama and his administration forfeited a major political opening to set the country on a new track. The political will to sanction the culprits, heal the harms, and prevent such violence in the future by restructuring the financial sector quickly dissipated, as detailed in chapters 8 and 9. In his memoirs, Obama contends that meting out criminal sanctions to the financiers who triggered the financial and foreclosure crises would have done “violence to the social order.”⁹⁶ Instead, his administration pursued modest regulatory reforms that left in place many of the pathogens that triggered the financial and foreclosure crises.

As Wall Street rapidly rebounded from the Great Recession, much of the country remained mired in debt, unemployment, underemployment, and foreclosures. Standards of living deteriorated for many people, and income inequality, poverty, and homelessness increased. The shrinking tax base and the attacks on deficit spending from the right and center (including President Obama's jabs in his 2011 State of the Union address) further imperiled the social safety net, which was already threadbare.⁹⁷ Public services to mitigate this pain withered as tax revenues plummeted thanks to regressive tax policies and rising unemployment and foreclosure rates.

By the end of the Obama administration, a new regime to deal with elite-level corporate crime by top executives and their companies had congealed into a "corporate shield" that protected them from charges of "colossal fraud."⁹⁸ The consolidation of this corporate shield had enormous economic and political implications. It cast widespread doubt not only on the legitimacy and fairness of the criminal legal system but also on the legitimacy and fairness of the economic and political systems. The uber-wealthy's politics of entitlement shielded top executives and their corporations from serious legal consequences and protected their growing stockpiles of assets, bonuses, and profits.

Crime in the Streets and "Thick Public Safety"

This maldistribution of economic and political power robbed the government and ultimately the wider society of the vital resources needed to foster safe, thriving, and healthy communities with low levels of despair, violence, and premature deaths. The giant fiscal and political investment in the country's global empire compounded these problems.

Violent street crime is not exceptionally high in the United States compared to affluent democracies. The one big exception—and it is a big one—is homicide and gun-related deaths and injuries.⁹⁹ Since the mid-1990s, rates of violent crime have plummeted in the United States, but they remain remarkably high. Between 1990 and 2019, the homicide victimization rate for African American people fell by nearly 40 percent.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, about 217,000 Black males were homicide victims between 1990 and 2019—a figure that exceeds the total number of US military casualties during the decade-long American war in Southeast Asia by about 400 percent.¹⁰¹ And for every Black male killed by gun violence, another twenty-four incurred nonfatal injuries from shootings.¹⁰² Black women are also victims of exceptionally high rates of violence, including homicide and sexual assault.¹⁰³

As US rates of street crime fell from their peak in the mid-1990s, violent street crime became more unequally distributed in this country.¹⁰⁴ Celebrating the great crime drop while ignoring these facts is like heralding the record highs of the US stock market or gains in US per capita income without considering trends in income distribution or poverty rates.¹⁰⁵ Violent street crime is highly stratified by race, class, and neighborhood.¹⁰⁶ In one striking example, when Barack Obama became president in 2009, the homicide rate in Chicago's Washington Park, whose population is overwhelmingly poor and 98 percent African American, was more than twenty-five times higher than the rate in neighboring affluent Hyde Park, home to the Obama family.¹⁰⁷

With the rise in the number of people living in residentially segregated neighborhoods, and of Black people living in concentrated poverty, the deleterious effects of growing up and residing in poor, segregated, urban neighborhoods are now well documented.¹⁰⁸ But it is extremely hard—perhaps impossible—to disentangle the race effects from the class effects in urban violence because there are virtually no urban white neighborhoods as poor as the poorest Black neighborhoods to make comparisons.¹⁰⁹

That said, the findings of decades of research on what explains trends in violent street crime *over the long term*, especially homicide rates, are remarkably robust. Certain structural factors, including higher rates of poverty, income inequality, and gun ownership, predict higher rates of homicide. So do other structural factors that are often related to income inequality, including residential segregation, pervasive economic discrimination, and the lack of thriving neighborhood and community groups.¹¹⁰ One additional factor in the US case appears to be the growing demand for opioids in certain communities since the late 1990s.¹¹¹

Differences in policing resources and policing strategies also likely explain some of the variations in rates of violent street crime (at least over the short term) between similarly situated communities. But experts on crime and policing do not agree on just how much to credit the police for sustained drops in rates of homicide and other violent crimes.¹¹² Small-bore solutions to stem violent street crime, notably the various “community violence intervention” programs, have attracted more scholarly and public attention recently. But these programs have had checkered success in fostering sustained—rather than just short-term—declines in violence in high-crime neighborhoods.¹¹³

Experts on crime generally agree that swift and certain apprehension and punishment deter street crime while ratcheting up penalties does not.¹¹⁴ But frightening people living in high-crime neighborhoods—many of whom are already alienated from law enforcement and the wider society—into obeying

the law by wielding credible threats that they will be arrested and punished if they don't obey is at best a second-rate solution.¹¹⁵ The better fix is to prevent crime by improving the social and economic conditions and the life chances of people who reside in marginalized and disadvantaged communities.¹¹⁶ But that would entail more money and resources. Lots more.

We need to foster what sociologist Bruce Western calls the “restorative power of thick public safety,” which keeps the peace by nurturing thriving communities and neighborhoods rather than by relying on intrusive and militarized police forces.¹¹⁷ But since the days of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society and war on poverty in the 1960s, conservatives on the right have hammered away at the social and economic supports that foster thick public safety and reduce homicides and other violent crimes. They succeeded in mainstreaming the view that public assistance and other public investments increase rather than reduce street crime, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.¹¹⁸ The extraordinary 8-to-1 Black-white disparity in US homicide victims overshadows the fact that the United States is a remarkably lethal country for other demographic groups.¹¹⁹ On the eve of the pandemic, non-Hispanic white people in the United States were two to five times more likely to be murdered than people living in Western Europe.¹²⁰

Crime prevention policies in Western Europe have followed different trajectories from those in the United States. In much of Western Europe, they have been “bound up with concerns about social exclusion and urban renewal in disadvantaged communities.”¹²¹ Police forces in Canada and Western Europe tend to be better trained, more highly educated, less militaristic, and more subject to civilian control. Canada and Western Europe also have more expansive social welfare and economic programs that curtail crime by ameliorating poverty and inequality and by providing high-quality day care, good schools, universal health care, public housing, and other vital social and economic supports.¹²² That model is now under great strain thanks to the rise in the number of migrants to Canada and Europe and other political and economic shifts.

Racism, Racial Disparities, and Violence

In any account of violence in America, race-related factors are key. The historical evidence is overwhelming that racial animus and the quest to preserve white supremacy have been central factors in American political development, including the disproportionate violence meted out to African American

people, Indigenous people, and other historically marginalized groups. But racism does not on its own explain how state, corporate, economic, structural, and interpersonal violence is perpetuated; why such violence fluctuates; why some groups are harmed more than others; or how to staunch the violence. Racism, just like neoliberalism, capitalism, and other isms, is not a historical actor itself but rather part of complex historical processes. The form and impact of these isms depend on the interplay of economic, institutional, political, and social factors over time and the choices individuals and groups make in a given moment and context. In the case of policing, for example, there is not a straight line from the antebellum slave patrols to the cops in armed personnel carriers patrolling the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, in summer 2014 after a police officer killed Michael Brown, a Black teenager.

Furthermore, as the racial order invents new ways and resurrects old ones to target African American people, it has generated punitive, often violent, policies and practices that diffuse to other people in the United States and abroad. At the dawn of the Jim Crow era more than a century ago, the massive disenfranchisement of African American people through poll taxes, literacy tests, and violence overshadowed the vast and simultaneous disenfranchisement of poor white people in the South that stunted the Populist movement during the Gilded Age. Likewise, the hyperincarceration of Black men today and the disproportionate number of African American people killed by the police have overshadowed the lethal consequences of state and other violence for other groups of people in the United States.

Researchers have devised sophisticated statistical models to measure the Black-white disparities in life expectancy and other realms, including education, employment, health care, income, incarceration, and wealth. The tendency to focus on racial disparities has overshadowed disparities related to class, ethnicity, geography, gender, sexuality, and so forth. Furthermore, the degree to which certain inequalities “that appear statistically as ‘racial’ disparities” may in fact be embedded in other political, social, and economic relations has not received sufficient scholarly or public attention.¹²³ Measuring racial and other disparities in incarceration rates, war casualties, police killings of civilians, suicides, overdoses, and other premature deaths does not tell us much about the underlying factors that generate so much violence in America.¹²⁴ To borrow from political scientist Cedric Johnson, rising violence on these many fronts is not “a uniquely black predicament.”¹²⁵

The forces of financialization, globalization, and rapid technological change that have transformed the US economy are not exceptional to the United

States.¹²⁶ But they have had exceptionally toxic consequences here. The United States is in the midst of a “reversal in fortunes” in life expectancy.¹²⁷ A global leader in life expectancy for much of the twentieth century, the United States is now a laggard.¹²⁸ An unprecedented twenty-year chasm has opened up between US counties with the longest and shortest life expectancies.¹²⁹ The mortality rate is still higher for African American people than for white people, but that gap is narrowing quickly thanks to rising mortality rates for white men and women, especially less-educated white people, who have experienced a catastrophic drop in life expectancy.¹³⁰

Canada, Japan, and Western Europe have not experienced the epic drops in life expectancy that have gripped the United States.¹³¹ On the eve of the pandemic in 2019, nearly one-quarter of all US deaths would not have occurred that year if US mortality rates had matched the average rate of wealthy democracies.¹³² Those “missing Americans” totaled nearly 623,000 premature deaths in 2019.¹³³

Wrong on Crime and Violence

In the early 2000s, leading conservatives in the United States appeared to make a major shift on the issues of crime, punishment, and mass incarceration. With pressures mounting to reduce the country’s prison and jail population, name-brand conservatives—including billionaire Charles Koch, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and tax slayer Grover Norquist—aligned with Right on Crime, a national initiative led by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, one of the country’s leading hard-right organizations. Supporters of Right on Crime, established in 2007, pressed the case for criminal justice reform, including lowering the incarceration rate, in the name of reducing the burden that the criminal legal system placed on government budgets.¹³⁴ Their shift fostered a burst of optimism across the political spectrum that the United States might be reaching the beginning of the end of mass incarceration.¹³⁵

The optimism fostered by Right on Crime and its coalition partners on the left, on the right, and in between turned out to be unwarranted. Since Right on Crime was established, the US incarceration rate has barely dipped. Meanwhile, the “prison beyond the prison,” including parole, probation, community sanctions, drug courts, immigrant detention, and other forms of penal control, has continued to expand. Justice reinvestment initiatives have failed to channel major savings from the penal system to the communities and people most

harmful by mass incarceration. The actual savings have been relatively small, and they have often ended up in the pockets of law enforcement.¹³⁶

But Right on Crime did yield enormous political payoffs for the far right and its corporate and wealthy patrons. It allowed them to don the cloak of bipartisanship and political reasonableness as they supported small-bore solutions—most notably the federal First Step Act, signed into law by President Donald Trump in December 2018—that would not significantly reduce the incarceration rate.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, they continued to promote their radical agenda, including the decades-long push to starve the government by forcing Congress and the states to divest from the very items proven to reduce violent street crime, stem premature deaths, and improve the quality of life in the country's most disadvantaged communities and elsewhere, including good schools, good health care, living-wage jobs, and a robust social safety net.¹³⁸ In one of its biggest political achievements, Right on Crime succeeded in re-branding Texas as a model of criminal justice reform. "Be more like Texas" became a rallying cry for public figures across the political spectrum, including President Obama, even though the Lone Star State has one of the country's highest incarceration rates, some of the most brutal and inhumane lockups, and one of the most threadbare social safety nets.¹³⁹

Furthermore, as leading conservatives were endorsing modest reforms such as the First Step Act, they also pressed for concessions on the issue of corporate crime. They aligned with major business groups and top corporate executives, including Charles and David Koch, in pushing for legislation to create a higher standard of criminal intent that critics nicknamed "The White Collar Immunity Act."¹⁴⁰ Federal prosecutors, consumer and environmental advocates, and other critics charged that such measures, if enacted, would gut many protections by making it even harder to hold top executives and their firms accountable to the criminal legal system.

Democracy in America

When asked why he robbed banks, legendary thief Willie Sutton reportedly answered: "Because that's where the money is."¹⁴¹ The police, prisons, and rest of the US criminal legal system consume a greater proportion of public budgets than they once did. But the total amount is still trivial compared to other public spending and to the tax breaks lavished on corporations and the wealthiest Americans.¹⁴² The real money is the nearly \$1 trillion in military expenditures each year, and the trillions of dollars lost to tax subsidies, tax

cuts, tax loopholes, and tax dodges that have engorged wealthy corporations and individuals at great cost to the rest of society, as discussed in chapter 12.

In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, the police were not defunded, despite escalating calls to do so. In fact, many law enforcement budgets increased.¹⁴³ But even if advocates of defunding the police had succeeded in trimming or even gutting police budgets, this would have provided only a trickle of the money and other resources needed to significantly reduce street crime and curtail premature deaths by addressing their root causes. As Cynthia Lum, an expert on policing and a former police officer, observes, “The idea that these communities need resources to be shuffled from one group to another to help them is frankly a privileged perspective. These communities need more resources across all services.”¹⁴⁴

In the wake of 9/11, the Great Recession, and the pandemic, curtailing interpersonal, state, corporate, and structural violence is a more formidable task. Compared to the days of the savings and loan banking scandal of the 1980s, the wealthiest financial institutions, high-tech corporations, and individuals now possess vastly superior weapons to loot and destabilize the broader economy. Far from disarming them, the government’s response to the financial and foreclosure crises of 2007–9 emboldened them. Policymakers rendered the financial world “far more criminogenic” and yet further beyond the reach of regulators and law enforcement.¹⁴⁵ The unprecedented political and economic dominance that the financial industry achieved in the wake of these crises amounted to a “quiet coup,” according to Simon Johnson, former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund.¹⁴⁶

The United States remains acutely vulnerable to another major economic upheaval brought on by the financial industry, the 0.1 percent, and their accomplices in the government for many of the same reasons that caused the Great Recession and then some. The stakes are even higher now because the country is facing a political crisis in which the very future of democracy is at stake here and in many other countries. As George Mason, a delegate from Virginia, warned at the outset of the constitutional convention nearly 250 years ago, “If we do not provide against corruption, our government will soon be at an end.”¹⁴⁷

The perilous state of democracy in America has become a central concern of numerous scholars and public commentators.¹⁴⁸ Some contend that the United States has become an “anocracy”—neither a democracy nor an autocracy, but rather something in between. Others suggest the country may be on its way to becoming a “zombie democracy,” an authoritarian state, or a new

variant of totalitarianism.¹⁴⁹ A decade ago, former President Jimmy Carter declared that the United States had become an oligarchy and was no longer a democracy.¹⁵⁰ In his farewell address to the nation in January 2025, President Joe Biden warned that “an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power, and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms, and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead.”¹⁵¹

The collapse of public confidence in all kinds of government institutions, including Congress, the presidency, and the US Supreme Court, has drawn much media and scholarly attention. Less noticed is that the public’s confidence in capitalism and corporations has also declined, even among Republican voters.¹⁵² By the mid-1980s, public opinion research had “punctured the notion that the criminal immunity enjoyed by white-collar offenders was the will of the people—that it was somehow democracy taking its course.”¹⁵³ Surveys since then reveal that the public remains deeply troubled by crime in the suites and favors bringing criminal charges and levying penalties against executives and corporations.¹⁵⁴

On the eve of the financial crisis, surveys found that the public continued to view numerous white-collar crimes to be as serious as street crimes; wanted more resources devoted to controlling crime in the suites; and favored getting tougher with corporate executives who violate the law. Furthermore, members of the public agreed by overwhelming margins that executives of large corporations were grossly overpaid, dishonest, and unethical. In a 2006 Gallup poll, big business and health maintenance organizations (HMOs) tied for dead last in a national poll gauging how much confidence the public had in sixteen major US institutions, including Congress (which ranked just above them, at number 14).¹⁵⁵

The downward slide of so many poor and working-class people in the United States—many of whom are white, many of whom are not—and the precarious state of other people struggling to keep their toehold on a middle-class life have been misunderstood, ignored, dismissed, or mischaracterized. This is why the Democratic and Republican establishment and the mainstream media could not fathom that Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Donald Trump were anything more than entertaining political sideshows when they first ran for president in 2016. Until they weren’t.

Many people in the United States continued to struggle years after the Great Recession had been declared officially over. But the power brokers in the Democratic Party under Obama’s leadership resumed business as usual and marginalized Bernie Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), and others

calling to break up the banks and reverse the radical upward redistribution of wealth and political power. No wonder that people were ready to heed Donald Trump's siren call to "drain the swamp," wherever that might lead.¹⁵⁶

Trump's racial, ethnic, and other taunts in the 2016 election reinforced the view that unreconstructed white supremacists, militias, and misogynists centered in rural America and the white working class were the cement that held his base together. In short, the "basket of deplorables" that Hillary Clinton reviled in her remarks to a well-heeled New York City audience during the 2016 campaign.¹⁵⁷ But while Donald Trump may be a simple man, his base of supporters is not.¹⁵⁸ In his three quests for the presidency, Trump tapped into and cultivated a vein of racial resentment and rage. But his electoral success is not comprehensible without a deeper understanding of how the forever wars, the de facto decriminalization of crime in the suites, the opioid crisis, and the grossly unequal economic recovery from the Great Recession have contributed to all kinds of violence in America and reshaped American politics.

As he railed against the forever wars, conjured up his "mutant populism," and attacked the corporate and government swamp, Trump also vowed to double down on people who were charged with street crimes, drug offenses, and immigration violations.¹⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the white power movement, which had been decades in the making, was ready to seize the moment and play its part in normalizing political violence as it forged closer ties to Donald Trump, the Republican Party, the police, and the US military.¹⁶⁰

Trump stoked and braided together many strands of resentment and rage—against women, against people of color, against immigrants but also against the widely perceived sellout of the government to corporations, as captured by his frequent refrain to "drain the swamp."¹⁶¹ His final commercial to close the deal in the 2016 election was riveting. It featured cameos of a rainbow of everyday working-class Americans interspersed with clips of the world's economic and political elite, including Hillary and Bill Clinton, Lloyd Blankfein of Goldman Sachs, and billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros. Much of the ad looked like something that the Bernie Sanders campaign could have produced, except that the voiceover was unmistakably Trump's as he warned: "It's a global power structure that is responsible for the economic decisions that have robbed our working class, stripped our economy of its wealth and put that money into the pockets of a handful of large corporations and political entities."¹⁶²

Slaying the anti-state state, reducing violence in its many manifestations in the United States and overseas, and revitalizing democracy in America will

depend on building broad coalitions that incorporate many of the disposable people that the US empire and its political and economic system are churning out. Many of the people that Hillary Clinton reviled as deplorable are living precarious lives.

The most successful periods of political mobilization to foster economic and political equality in the United States—Reconstruction, the New Deal, the civil rights era—rested on expansive political and social movements. These movements did not single-mindedly focus on racial disparities but sought to forge broader political agendas centered on racial, social, and economic justice that drew in a wide range of groups.¹⁶³ Likewise, throughout US history, major movements against war and militarism have been broad and multifaceted ones that rested on complex, often imperfect, coalitions. Successfully rolling back the various tentacles of violence in America today will depend on fostering alliances that stretch from the hollers of Appalachia to the streets of North Philadelphia to the victims of the US empire overseas.

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